

Stakeholder-policymaker cooperation in the age of the SDGs: what new approaches are required for success?

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Key note address

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The cooperation we need

All of us here share a tremendous collective hope. We hope for the concept of sustainable development to keep its promise. It strives to help humanity move forward towards economic, social and cultural progress while recognising the planetary boundaries of nature. We have actually made progress, worldwide. Human rights have spread, more people share in prosperity, poverty has been reduced. But the scorecard is clear: more remains still to be done than has been achieved. Not to mention, these days previous achievements are under increasing threat of deconstruction or of being bypassed. The foundations of the universality of human rights and values are being called into question by nationalists and cultural relativism.

Thus, we need a clear head and some fresh views on the deep crisis our world order is in – economically, financially, in terms of the environment and social connectedness. There have been major failures and derailments, and there are also tasks and efforts we have not yet satisfactorily resolved.

That is where the issue of cooperation comes in, with all sorts of pitfalls and all sorts of great experiences.

Let us remember the early days of environmentalism when we started out with three principles. Number one is the idea of making the polluter pay for the damage. The second is the principle of precaution. And the third principle is the one on cooperation. While environmental policies have made some progress in implementing the first two, the cooperation principle has fallen by the wayside. Which basically means we are not making full use of our collective capacity to respond to crises.

For *The Future We Want* we do not yet have *the cooperation we need*.

Stakeholders and policymakers do not yet cooperate effectively.¹ However, [*The Future We Want*](#) as postulated by the 2030 Agenda marks an important shift in priorities and the SDGs can make a difference. It calls for XXXL cooperation between unlikely partners.

As of now, I think it is fair to say, the 2030 Agenda is not yet delivering. Lately, political chauvinism has been distorting geopolitics and bypassing the Agenda. Sadly, that compounds the fact that the 2030 Agenda missed some important windows of opportunity that could have strengthened its momentum. In the official language we are still stuck with ODA, official development aid, as opposed to ODC, as in official development cooperation. The symbolic kick of such a reframing cannot be overstated. The Agenda has not prompted national governments to invite frontrunner alliances that would strive to deliver on SDG sub-targets faster than 2030 and in so doing pocket first-mover advantages. To illustrate this: the African Union recently agreed to establish a free trade zone under the SDG umbrella that would foster the internal African market (as opposed to the mere focus on exports). This is a long shot, of course. But one that we need to respond to. The European Union should offer the African continent fair free trade support based on sustainable finance instruments and give clear signals of cooperation. What we hear from Brussels in that respect is still lacking in terms of grand triggers. Unfortunately, the United Nations' High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), as the one and only collective anchor point we have, is far too weak to push things ahead. But I am convinced the HLPF can be structured and redesigned in such a way that it will press ahead with the 2030 Agenda's momentum.²

A serious business

For "decision makers" and "stakeholders" cooperation is a mutual challenge. It lies with politics and policies as well as with the stakeholder communities at all levels. And, it is worth keeping in mind that everyone is a stakeholder at some stage, as the concept of stakeholder is defined by a positioning rather than a profession or behaviour. In terms of the "One Planet", there is no one without a stake.

¹ ECOSOC (2016): Dialogue on longer-term positioning of UN Development System in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Findings and Conclusions (report of Klaus Töpfer and Juan Somavia); <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/ita-findings-and-conclusions-16-jun-2016.pdf>

² The German Council for Sustainable Development therefore recommends fast action designed to steer the HLPF away from a dead end, see: https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RNE_statement_HLPF_Governance.pdf

Cooperation is a serious business. I suggest even considering it the most hard-nosed part of politics. Cooperation deals with both mutuality and confrontation. Every consensus that I am aware of builds on a previous conflict, and so does cooperation. After all, cooperation is a well known ecological principle. As we see among many species, sharing mutual benefits is part of their strategies for competitiveness. In the natural world, cooperative behaviours are at the core of survival strategies.



Thus, it is surprising that cooperation is not highly esteemed in most of the sociotopes we live in. In addition, the outcome of partnerships or other cooperative efforts where they are implemented seldom meets the requirements and keeps meandering.³ In fact, cooperation even has enemies, working mainly behind the scenes.

Everybody wants cooperation when it is for others, yet everybody hates to lose control and resources if that is what cooperation entails. Cooperation is regularly put on the back burner when non-cooperative behaviour is likely to win a good old turf war, or when campaigning draws full media attention and increases spending. In those cases, the USP, or unique selling point, wins over cooperation. The inflation of processes and strategies does not help particularly either. Social media allows for great resonance in silo-ed peer groups which are otherwise unconnected and unchallenged. Parallel internet universes create echo chambers. Meaningful engagement might deteriorate or it might go into duck-and-hide mode.

The reasons – even if they are diverse and difficult to compare – are rooted in institutional, economic and social structures. The internal rationality of turfs and silos is often overruling out-of-the-box cooperation. In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, tried to reinforce the notion of partnerships, but was basically flawed. The Achilles heel of cooperation doesn't exactly help either: the issues of who is accountable or of who has the legitimacy to speak and act in favour of third-party constituencies are ongoing challenges. But those problems could be solved in principle, and we can all think of some good examples.

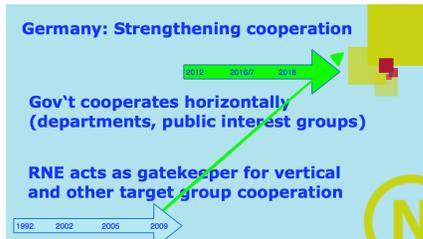
Fundamental misconceptions, however, are more complicated to deal with. I often hear people denouncing cooperation as something for wimps or for those who shy away from a good fight and a robust use of elbows. Correspondingly, cooperation is misconceived as nice-but-harmless people's attitude as opposed to what is viewed as “real-world” competition and achievements.



³ According to a check run by Marianne Beisheim (2018) on the official listing of UN-related SDG MSP, only 409 reported on progress and transparency. Out of a total of 3,834 partnerships/commitments 84% are non-reporters. (cited according to Felix Dodds' blog <http://blog.felixdodds.net/2018/07/zombie-partnerships-are-we-about-to-see.html>); see also Hemmati, M., Dodds, F. (2016): High-quality Multi-stakeholder Partnerships for Implementing the SDGs, http://newfrontierspublishing.com/images/MSP-Workshop_Blog_GRICatalySD.pdf; Beisheim, M., Ellersiek, A. (2017): Partnerships for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Transformative, Inclusive and Accountable?, SWP Research Paper 2017/RP 14, December 2017; https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2017RP14_bsh_elk_01.pdf

Unfortunately, this misconception is matched equally on the opposing side. Here, we have the notion of cooperation as the silver bullet for each and every problem. No matter what the problem is, cooperation is suggested as the solution. Neither the wimp view nor this overestimation actually matches realities. They are both a myth.

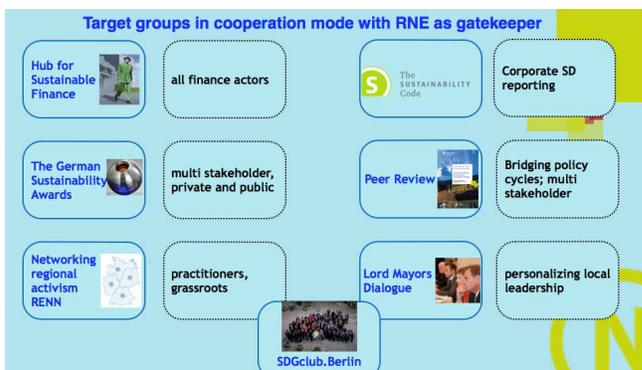
It is therefore fair to say that cooperation can equally provide benefits and encounter pitfalls, as indicated by the plus and minus symbols on this slide.



The German case

Over the last couple of years, the German Government has clearly increased its cooperation efforts. The Chancellery with its top-level responsibility for the German Sustainable Development Strategy provides an institutional framework for cooperation among the federal departments. The

recently renewed strategy also invites public interest groups to provide input for the preparation of high-level decision-making in terms of the sustainability strategy, its goals, targets and indicators. The Rio-plus-20 Summit in 2012 was a milestone marking this change in attitude and working profile. The German Government sets up and mandates the Council for Sustainable Development as a stakeholder-policy maker cooperation. Since 2001, its work profile (see Rules of Procedure⁴) has been both inbound (dialogue with the Government to give advice contributing to the national SD strategy) and outbound (suggesting, promoting and strengthening discourse within society and cooperative attitudes). Every three years, the process of selecting the Council's members and mandating a new Council in fact becomes a practical reality check on how the sustainability narrative attracts stakeholders. It bears mentioning that our most recent recommendation calls for a strengthening the Government's use of multilateralism in general and cooperation in particular.⁵



The 2018 German Almanac of Sustainability is being published these days. Written for interested groups abroad and introduced by our Federal Foreign Minister, it showcases the ways the society in Germany is tackling the great transition towards sustainable development.

4 RNE Rules of Procedure (as of 2016): "a. The Council shall develop contributions to refine and implement the German Sustainability Strategy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To do so, it shall propose specific projects and support mutual learning, particularly through peer reviews, b. The Council shall issue statements on matters submitted to the Council by the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development. (...) the Council may comment on topics relating to sustainable development (...), c. The Council shall promote dialogue within society on sustainable development at national and international level. It shall implement projects to establish the idea of sustainability effectively within society and business, and shall foster the international exchange of experience." see: https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/RNE_Rules_of_Procedure_english.pdf

5 https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RNE_statement_HLPF_Governance.pdf

The Council's most prominent projects and initiatives build on stakeholder involvement and thus stakeholder-policy maker cooperation. Details on those initiatives can be found at www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/en/. Possible ways of cooperation may come in the form of targeted invitations, e.g. to city mayors, or in an open-format invitation (open to all interested parties in the sustainable finance sector including stakeholders). They might focus on certain areas of competence and functionality, such as corporate reporting or universities doing sustainability reports. Or, they might include many stakeholders from different areas of action and are "open" in this way. The choice of bottom-up or top-down processes is dependent on effectiveness and adequacy. For the purpose of reviewing sustainability politics and policies, the concept of the peer review itself is made part of a multi-stakeholder approach.

Lessons

There is a number of interesting publications dealing with stakeholder cooperation and modern forms of governance⁶ which are surely a good help for anyone who is even thinking about stakeholder-policy maker cooperation and which provide food for thought. I will refer to the practical experience of the German Council for Sustainable Development. I would like to suggest a couple of essential points that should be taken into account. First, there are some important technicalities to mention. Or even more to the point: often what appears to be a mere technical question turns out to be a crucial milestone.



- Timing is essential in order to match policy cycles whether they are obvious, hidden or tacit. If matching is not an option, creating one from scratch might be.
- Cooperation is for everyone and must never sideline parliamentary democracy.
- Build on competence, commitment and capacity, the three big Cs.
- Fatigue can be counteracted by design and impact.
- Start with the audacity of hope⁷: big hairy ideas are more useful than getting stuck in analysing what is acceptable.
- Tolerate failures and flops, but never repeat the same ones.
- Hear what is not being said – the single most important issue for any cooperation.
- Work out what really matters for stakeholders as opposed to what is said and fought for.

6 Brouwer, H. et al (2016): The MSP Guide: How to Design and Facilitate Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships; <https://doi.org/10.3362/9781780446691>; Meuleman, L. (ed.) (2012): Transgovernance: Advancing Sustainability Governance, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer; Meuleman, L. (2018): Metagovernance for Sustainability: A Framework for Implementing the SDGs, London: Routledge; Hemmati, Minu (2002): Multi-stakeholder Processes for Governance and Sustainability. Beyond Deadlock and Conflict, with contributions from F. Dodds, J. Enayati and J. McHarry, London: Earthscan; Schmitz-Hoffmann, C., Schmidt, M., Hansmann, B., Palekhov, D. (eds.) (2014): Voluntary Standard Systems. A Contribution to Sustainable Development, Berlin: Springer

7 Bachmann, G. (2017): The 18th SDG. Sustainable Development in a Changing World: A Changing Perspective on Sustainability. Think piece presented at the UN Office for Sustainable Development on the occasion of the Sustainable Development Transition Forum; https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/migration/documents/Bachmann_Think_Piece_SDG_18_UN_OSD_SDTF_2016-10-27.pdf

- Make it personal, e.g. by using clear language and avoiding passive formulations.
- Silos: in principle, silos are part of the problem – but never waste a good one.
- Addressing a certain group of stakeholders must not delegitimise others.

The clearer the purpose, the better the fun part is

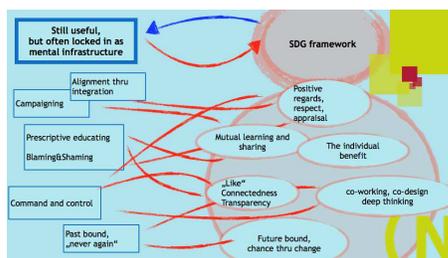
I suggest differentiating between several modes of cooperation. Getting to know differences helps run stakeholder processes successfully. I suggest differentiating based on scope and purpose. I make use of both open-access processes, targeted invitations and other structured approaches. The purpose often dictates the type of activity, with all overlaps and crossovers:

- Talking: Sharing insights and disseminating information.
- Empowering: Deliberating on agreements and delivering joint action.
- Designing: Setting rules of conduct and initiating processes.
- Partnering: Creating and advancing communities of practitioners.

Cooperation can be fun and should be made a fun experience in order to ensure viable results. Caring about purpose, meeting schedules and completing paperwork sounds dull and exhausting. The fun part often comes about through good moderation, through an interesting and mind-opening location, or through surprising processes. The best surprise, of course, is when participants surprise themselves by having new ideas. They then almost without taking note evolve into cooperation-style attitudes.

Culture is it

The concept of governance is changing, together with some basic attitudes toward change, well-being and connectedness. These changes in mindset are not exclusive to young people either. I suggest these changes are spreading through all parts of society and the private sector. This slide



attempts to name some of these changes. The blue sector is not simply being replaced, but still has its meaningful role to play. However, the dominant behaviour and skills are morphing increasingly into the red field.

Interestingly, the blue attitude appears “dated” and somewhat “nineties”.

Change is increasingly perceived as a chance (opportunities, choices to choose from). Networking seems to be the new campaigning. The concept of blame and shame is being challenged by new attitudes towards collective leadership and mutual learning. Consequently, we are seeing new actors come to the fore. They will find new ways of cooperation. Co-working and co-design is only the beginning.

Culture eats strategies for breakfast, said Paul Drucker, a US democrat. Strategies, as in sustainability strategies, merge into the most important tool of administrative transition governance, with all ingredients such as targets and timetables, actor-driven trajectories and

metrics. The exercise of strategising and planning is the most important part. However, the cultural changes, once triggered, are much more powerful because they make people see change not as something brought to them (or worse: something they are confronted with), but simply as the new normal.

Gatekeeper

We hopefully will lead the SDG track into a new era of multilateralism and cooperation, with new features of collective leadership, peer reviewing, the politics of commitment, transparency tools. This, of course, cannot work without orchestration. Policymaker-stakeholder cooperation needs an institution that functions as a gatekeeper. It needs to amass the calling power, think tank capacity, ethical credibility and power of self-reflection. And the gatekeeper needs funds. Money is not everything, of course, but in order to keep the wheel spinning, money is needed. Germany, on the part of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, has set an example. The 2030 Agenda Transformation Fund is available for non-governmental stakeholders in partner countries that want to establish stakeholder platforms for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

I would like to end my talk by posing a question: don't you think it is time to ask for a similar fund in Europe? Europe's 2030 Transformation Fund should empower stakeholder-policymaker cooperation and, thus, help implement the SDGs throughout Europe and in other regions. I believe in universal values. To become a cultural norm, however, those values need gatekeepers. We need to restore a strong multilateral, multi-level and multi-stakeholder system capable of resolving conflicts in a pragmatic manner, and capable also of building trust and stewardship in a new way.

Thank you for listening.